

Struggling Schools Summary

Forum participants cited problems with school culture as one sign of a struggling school. Teachers and other educational professionals in particular mentioned behavioral issues in the classrooms while all participants mentioned the need for safe schools with high attendance rates, filled with motivated students. Without changes to culture, a school will continue to struggle.

When addressing struggling schools, participants strongly suggested the involvement of all stakeholders in the process: parents, students, educators and community members. Family capacity to address issues is sometimes limited due to poverty and single parent households. The cultural background of families and parents should be acknowledged by school reformers. Schools need to help such parents. Several participants suggested providing services for all families. This included a “full family learning environment” that has adult education, nutritional or health services. In addition, families need to be engaged in the process of aiding struggling schools. The community could also be a force for change but the inherent inequities of funding and resources must be addressed. Some suggestions for doing so would be to consolidate or regionalize districts and/or programs.

Charter schools were offered as a solution by many participants with some reservations. Innovation seemed to be the key factor in recommending charter schools, followed by giving parents a choice in educational options. Concerns with charters included: worries about money being drained from traditional public schools, using charters as a band-aid for failing schools as well as a limited opportunity for charters outside urban/urban ring districts.

Charter schools have been a model for reform namely due to their innovative practices. Such strategies should be used in public schools. Other innovations for struggling schools could include: addressing the health and nutritional needs of students, working on attendance and transient student concerns, home visits to families, personalized learning, mandatory kindergarten and pre-K, longer school days and year round schools. Hope High School was offered as a model for successful reform by many participants. Lastly, school level administrators such as principals should have the authority to hire or fire staff. Autonomy at the school level was stressed by many participants. Educators felt the same with the caveat that administrators should stay in a position long enough to create stability in a school and rapport with the students, parents and community.

Closing and reorganizing schools was supported with the caveat of being mindful, respectful and keeping neighborhood schools intact. Shutting down a school has an impact on the neighborhood, community and students that can be very traumatic. Community involvement in any struggling school is key. In particular, if a school is shut-down the community should be involved. All participants agreed that failing schools was a problem that needed to be addressed at the state level.